

**IN THE UNITED STATES DISTRICT COURT
FOR THE MIDDLE DISTRICT OF PENNSYLVANIA**

GREGORY GIBBS,	:	Civil No. 3:12-CV-1751
	:	
Plaintiff,	:	
	:	
v.	:	(Judge Caputo)
	:	
JOHN WETZEL, et al.,	:	(Magistrate Judge Carlson)
	:	
Defendants.	:	

REPORT AND RECOMMENDATION

I. Statement of Facts and of The Case

A. Procedural History

This is a *pro se* civil rights case brought by a state prisoner housed at the State Correctional institution Rockview, Gregory Gibbs, through the filing of a civil rights complaint on September 4, 2012. (Doc. 1.) Gibbs' complaint names six Defendants: John Wetzel, the Secretary of the Department of Corrections; Marirosa Lamas, the Superintendent at SCI Rockview; Lt. Hardy, who is alleged to have denied Gibbs' nutritional supplements for a week in May 2012; and three correctional officers, C.O. Fisher, Sherman and Lidgett, who are alleged to have inflicted injuries upon Gibbs in May and August of 2012.

While the complaint describes direct actions taken by Defendants Hardy, Sherman, Fisher and Lidgett with respect to the Plaintiff, as to the two supervisory

Defendants— John Wetzel, the Secretary of the Department of Corrections and Marirosa Lamas, the Superintendent at SCI Rockview—Gibbs’ complaint simply alleges that these supervisory Defendants have overall responsibility for operation of the prison. On the basis of this otherwise unadorned allegation, Gibbs seeks to hold these supervisory officials personally liable to him for compensatory damages totaling \$100,000 and punitive damages of \$50,000. (Id.)

Along with this complaint, Gibbs has filed a motion for leave to proceed *in forma pauperis*. (Doc. 2.) Upon a screening review of this complaint, we recommend that the Plaintiff’s motion for leave to proceed *in forma pauperis* be granted, (Doc. 2.), but that the Plaintiff’s complaint be dismissed with respect to Defendants Wetzel and Lamas without prejudice to the Plaintiff endeavoring to correct the defects cited in this report, provided that the Plaintiff acts within 20 days of any dismissal order.

II. Discussion

A. Screening of Pro Se In forma Pauperis Complaints—Standard of Review

This Court has a statutory obligation to conduct a preliminary review of *pro se* complaints brought by plaintiffs given leave to proceed *in forma pauperis* in cases which seek redress against government officials. Specifically, we are obliged to

review the complaint pursuant to 28 U.S.C. § 1915A which provides, in pertinent part:

(a) Screening. - The court shall review, before docketing, if feasible or, in any event, as soon as practicable after docketing, a complaint in a civil action in which a prisoner seeks redress from a governmental entity or officer or employee of a governmental entity.

(b) Grounds for dismissal. - On review, the court shall identify cognizable claims or dismiss the complaint, or any portion of the complaint, if the complaint-

(1) is frivolous, malicious, or fails to state a claim upon which relief may be granted; or

(2) seeks monetary relief from a defendant who is immune from such relief.

Under Section 1915A, the court must assess whether a *pro se* complaint “fails to state a claim upon which relief may be granted.” This statutory text mirrors the language of Rule 12(b)(6) of the Federal Rules of Civil Procedure, which provides that a complaint should be dismissed for “failure to state a claim upon which relief can be granted.” Fed. R. Civ. P. 12(b)(6).

With respect to this benchmark standard for legal sufficiency of a complaint, the United States Court of Appeals for the Third Circuit has aptly noted the evolving standards governing pleading practice in federal court, stating that:

Standards of pleading have been in the forefront of jurisprudence in recent years. Beginning with the Supreme Court's opinion in Bell

Atlantic Corp. v. Twombly, 550 U.S. 544 (2007) continuing with our opinion in Phillips v. County of Allegheny, 515 F.3d 224, 230 (3d Cir. 2008)]and culminating recently with the Supreme Court's decision in Ashcroft v. Iqbal –U.S.–, 129 S.Ct. 1937 (2009) pleading standards have seemingly shifted from simple notice pleading to a more heightened form of pleading, requiring a plaintiff to plead more than the possibility of relief to survive a motion to dismiss.

Fowler v. UPMC Shadyside, 578 F.3d 203, 209-10 (3d Cir. 2009).

In considering whether a complaint fails to state a claim upon which relief may be granted, the court must accept as true all allegations in the complaint and all reasonable inferences that can be drawn from the complaint are to be construed in the light most favorable to the plaintiff. Jordan v. Fox Rothschild, O'Brien & Frankel, Inc., 20 F.3d 1250, 1261 (3d Cir. 1994). However, a court “need not credit a complaint’s bald assertions or legal conclusions when deciding a motion to dismiss.” Morse v. Lower Merion Sch. Dist., 132 F.3d 902, 906 (3d Cir. 1997). Additionally a court need not “assume that a ... plaintiff can prove facts that the ... plaintiff has not alleged.” Associated Gen. Contractors of Cal. v. California State Council of Carpenters, 459 U.S. 519, 526 (1983). As the Supreme Court held in Bell Atlantic Corp. v. Twombly, 550 U.S. 544 (2007), in order to state a valid cause of action a plaintiff must provide some factual grounds for relief which “requires more than labels and conclusions, and a formulaic recitation of the elements of a cause of actions will not do.” Id. at 555. “Factual allegations must be enough to raise a right

to relief above the speculative level.” Id. In keeping with the principles of Twombly, the Supreme Court has underscored that a trial court must assess whether a complaint states facts upon which relief can be granted when ruling on a motion to dismiss. In Ashcroft v. Iqbal, 556 U.S. 662 (2009), the Supreme Court held that, when considering a motion to dismiss, a court should “begin by identifying pleadings that, because they are no more than conclusions, are not entitled to the assumption of truth.” Id. at 679. According to the Supreme Court, “[t]hreadbare recitals of the elements of a cause of action, supported by mere conclusory statements, do not suffice.” Id. at 678. Rather, in conducting a review of the adequacy of complaint, the Supreme Court has advised trial courts that they must:

[B]egin by identifying pleadings that because they are no more than conclusions are not entitled to the assumption of truth. While legal conclusions can provide the framework of a complaint, they must be supported by factual allegations. When there are well-pleaded factual allegations, a court should assume their veracity and then determine whether they plausibly give rise to an entitlement to relief.

Id. at 679.

Thus, following Twombly and Iqbal a well-pleaded complaint must contain more than mere legal labels and conclusions. Rather, a complaint must recite factual allegations sufficient to raise the Plaintiff’s claimed right to relief beyond the level

of mere speculation. As the United States Court of Appeals for the Third Circuit has stated:

[A]fter Iqbal, when presented with a motion to dismiss for failure to state a claim, district courts should conduct a two-part analysis. First, the factual and legal elements of a claim should be separated. The District Court must accept all of the complaint's well-pleaded facts as true, but may disregard any legal conclusions. Second, a District Court must then determine whether the facts alleged in the complaint are sufficient to show that the plaintiff has a “plausible claim for relief.” In other words, a complaint must do more than allege the plaintiff's entitlement to relief. A complaint has to “show” such an entitlement with its facts.

Fowler, 578 F.3d at 210-11.

In practice, consideration of the legal sufficiency of a complaint entails a three-step analysis: “First, the court must ‘tak[e] note of the elements a plaintiff must plead to state a claim.’ Iqbal, 129 S.Ct. at 1947. Second, the court should identify allegations that, ‘because they are no more than conclusions, are not entitled to the assumption of truth.’ Id. at 1950. Finally, ‘where there are well-pleaded factual allegations, a court should assume their veracity and then determine whether they plausibly give rise to an entitlement for relief.’ Id.” Santiago v. Warminster Tp., 629 F.3d 121, 130 (3d Cir. 2010).

In addition to these pleading rules, a civil complaint must comply with the requirements of Rule 8(a) of the Federal Rule of Civil Procedure which defines what a complaint should say and provides that:

(a) A pleading that states a claim for relief must contain (1) a short and plain statement of the grounds for the court's jurisdiction, unless the court already has jurisdiction and the claim needs no new jurisdictional support; (2) a short and plain statement of the claim showing that the pleader is entitled to relief; and (3) a demand for the relief sought, which may include relief in the alternative or different types of relief.

Thus, a well-pleaded complaint must contain more than mere legal labels and conclusions. Rather, a *pro se* plaintiff's complaint must recite factual allegations which are sufficient to raise the plaintiff's claimed right to relief beyond the level of mere speculation, set forth in a "short and plain" statement of a cause of action.

B. Gibbs' Claims Against The Supervisory Defendants Fail as a Matter of Law

Judged against these legal benchmarks, we find that Gibbs' claims against Defendant John Wetzel, the Secretary of the Department of Corrections and Marirosa Lamas, the Superintendent at SCI Rockview clearly fail as a matter of law. In considering claims brought against supervisory officials arising out of alleged Eighth Amendment violations, the courts recognize that supervisors may be exposed to liability only in certain, narrowly defined circumstances.

For example, supervisory liability will rest on the basis that supervisors maintained deficient policies that resulted in the Plaintiff sustaining an Eighth Amendment injury. In these kinds of cases based upon allegations of deficient policies, the Third Circuit has fashioned a four-part test based upon the reasoning of

City of Canton v. Harris, 489 U.S. 378 (1989), for supervisory liability on an Eighth Amendment claim for failure to supervise. Under this test, “the plaintiff must identify a specific policy or practice that the supervisor failed to employ and show that: (1) the existing policy or practice created an unreasonable risk of the Eighth Amendment injury; (2) the supervisor was aware that the unreasonable risk was created; (3) the supervisor was indifferent to that risk; and (3) the injury resulted from the policy or practice.” Beers-Capitol, 256 F.3d at 134 (citing Sample v. Diecks, 885 F.2d 1099, 1118 (3d Cir. 1989)). Accordingly, these approaches are summarized as follows:

In sum, to make out a claim of deliberate indifference based on direct liability (i.e., insofar as the defendants are alleged to have known of and ignored the particular risk that Whetzel posed, the plaintiffs must meet the test from Farmer v. Brennan: They must show that the defendants knew or were aware of and disregarded an excessive risk to the plaintiffs’ health or safety, and they can show this by establishing that the risk was obvious. For the plaintiffs’ claims seeking to hold supervisors liable for their deficient policies, Sample’s four-part test provides the analytical structure for determining whether the policymakers exhibited deliberate indifference to the plaintiffs’ risk of injury, it being simply the deliberate indifference test applied to the specific situation of a policymaker.

Id.

Furthermore, it is equally clear that a claim of a constitutional deprivation cannot be premised merely on the fact that the named defendants were prison supervisors when the incidents set forth in the complaint occurred. Quite the

contrary, to state a constitutional tort claim the plaintiff must show that the supervisory defendants actively deprived him of a right secured by the Constitution. Morse v. Lower Merion School Dist., 132 F.3d 902 (3d Cir. 1997); see also Maine v. Thiboutot, 448 U.S. 1 (1980). Constitutional tort liability is personal in nature and can only follow personal involvement in the alleged wrongful conduct shown through specific allegations of personal direction or of actual knowledge and acquiescence in the challenged practice. Robinson v. City of Pittsburgh, 120 F.3d 1286 (3d Cir. 1997).

In particular, with respect to prison supervisors it is well-established that:

“A[n individual government] defendant in a civil rights action must have personal involvement in the alleged wrongdoing; liability cannot be predicated solely on the operation of *respondeat superior*. Personal involvement can be shown through allegations of personal direction or of actual knowledge and acquiescence.” Rode v. Dellarciprete, 845 F.2d 1195, 1207 (3d Cir.1988).

Evancho v. Fisher, 423 F.3d 347, 353 (3d Cir. 2005).

As the Supreme Court has observed:

Government officials may not be held liable for the unconstitutional conduct of their subordinates under a theory of *respondeat superior*. . . . See Monell v. New York City Dept. of Social Servs., 436 U.S. 658, 691, 98 S.Ct. 2018, 56 L.Ed.2d 611 (1978) (finding no vicarious liability for a municipal “person” under 42 U.S.C. § 1983); see also Dunlop v. Munroe, 7 Cranch 242, 269, 3 L.Ed. 329 (1812) (a federal official's liability “will only result from his own neglect in not properly superintending the discharge” of his subordinates' duties); Robertson v.

Sichel, 127 U.S. 507, 515-516, 8 S.Ct. 1286, 3 L.Ed. 203 (1888) (“A public officer or agent is not responsible for the misfeasances or position wrongs, or for the nonfeasances, or negligences, or omissions of duty, of the subagents or servants or other persons properly employed by or under him, in the discharge of his official duties”). Because vicarious liability is inapplicable to Bivens and § 1983 suits, a plaintiff must plead that each Government-official defendant, through the official's own individual actions, has violated the Constitution.

Ashcroft v. Iqbal, 556 U.S. 662, 676 (2009).

Applying these benchmarks, courts have frequently held that, in the absence of evidence of supervisory knowledge and approval of subordinates’ actions, a plaintiff may not maintain an action against supervisors based upon the misdeeds of their subordinates. O’Connell v. Sobina, No. 06-238, 2008 WL 144199, * 21 (W.D. Pa. Jan. 11, 2008); Neuburger v. Thompson, 305 F. Supp. 2d 521, 535 (W. D. Pa. 2004). Rather, “[p]ersonal involvement must be alleged *and is only present where the supervisor directed the actions of supervisees or actually knew of the actions and acquiesced in them*. See Rode v. Dellarciprete, 845 F.2d 1195, 1207 (3d Cir.1988).” Jetter v. Beard, 183 F.Appx. 178, 181 (3d Cir. 2006)(emphasis added).

Here, Gibbs does not allege that supervisory Defendants directed the conduct complained of by the Plaintiff, or had knowledge of that conduct and acquiesced in it. Rather, in the first instance, Gibbs simply alleges that Defendants Wetzel and Lamas were legally responsible for the overall operation of the institution, a claim

which is expressly premised on an assertion of *respondeat superior* liability. To the extent that Gibbs premises the liability of these particular Defendants upon the assertion that they were legally responsible for the overall operation of the institution, without setting forth any further factual basis for a claim against him in the body of this pleading, this cursory style of pleading is plainly inadequate to state a claim against a prison supervisor and compels dismissal of these defendants. Hudson v. City of McKeesport, 241 F. App'x 519 (3d Cir. 2007) (affirming dismissal of defendant who was only named in caption of case.)

Nor can an inmate, like Gibbs, sustain Eighth Amendment claims against prison supervisors based solely upon the suggestion that officials failed to adequately investigate or respond to his past grievances. Inmates do not have a constitutional right to a prison grievance system. See Jones, 433 U.S. at 137-138; Speight v. Sims, No. 08-2038, 283 F. App'x 880, 2008 WL 2600723 at *1 (3d Cir. June 30, 2008) (citing Massey v. Helman, 259 F.3d 641, 647 (7th Cir. 2001) (“[T]he existence of a prison grievance procedure confers no liberty interest on a prisoner.”)). Consequently, dissatisfaction with a response to an inmate’s grievances does not support a constitutional claim. See also Alexander v. Gennarini, 144 F. App'x 924 (3d Cir. 2005) (involvement in post-incident grievance process not a basis for § 1983 liability); Pryor-El v. Kelly, 892 F. Supp. 261, 275 (D. D.C. 1995) (because prison

grievance procedure does not confer any substantive constitutional rights upon prison inmates, the prison officials' failure to comply with grievance procedure is not actionable). See also Cole v. Sobina, No. 04-99J, 2007 WL 4460617, at *5 (W.D. Pa. Dec. 19, 2007) (“[M]ere concurrence in a prison administrative appeal process does not implicate a constitutional concern.”). As the United States Court of Appeals for the Third Circuit recently observed when disposing of a similar claim by another inmate:

Several named Defendants, such as the Secretaries of the Department of Corrections or Superintendents, were named only for their supervisory roles in the prison system. The District Court properly dismissed these Defendants and any additional Defendants who were sued based on their failure to take corrective action when grievances or investigations were referred to them. See Rode v. Dellarciprete, 845 F.2d 1195, 1207 (3d Cir.1988) (defendant in a civil rights action must have personal involvement in the alleged wrongs; liability cannot be predicated solely on the operation of *respondeat superior*); see also Antonelli v. Sheahan, 81 F.3d 1422, 1430 (7th Cir.1996) (state's inmate grievance procedures do not give rise to a liberty interest protected by the Due Process Clause)

Pressley v. Beard, 266 F. App'x 216, 218 (3d Cir. 2008).

Indeed, as to such claims, the United States Court of Appeals for the Third Circuit has recently held that summary dismissal is appropriate “because there is no apparent obligation for prison officials to investigate prison grievances. See Inmates of Attica Corr. Facility v. Rockefeller, 477 F.2d 375, 382 (2d Cir.1973).” Paluch v. Sec'y Pennsylvania Dept. Corr., 442 F. App'x 690, 695 (3d Cir. 2011).

In sum, in this case fairly construed, Gibbs' claims against Defendants Wetzel and Lamas consist of little more than assertions of *respondeat superior* liability, coupled with an unarticulated dissatisfaction with their processing of this inmate's past grievances, assertions which as a matter of law do not suffice to state a constitutional tort claim. Therefore, these defendants are entitled to be dismissed from this case.

C. Gibbs' Claim for a Specified Sum of Unliquidated Damages Should be Stricken

Further, we note that the Court should also strike the claim for specific sums of unliquidated damages, \$150,000, from this *pro se* complaint. In this regard, Rule 12(f) of the Federal Rules of Civil Procedure imposes a duty on the Court to review pleadings and provides that the Court may upon its own initiative at any time order stricken from any pleading any immaterial matter. Fed. R. Civ. P. 12(f). Decisions regarding whether claims may be stricken from a complaint are properly presented to a United States Magistrate Judge for determination in the first instance. Singh v. Superintending School Committee of the City of Portland, 593 F. Supp. 1315 (D. Me. 1984). In this case, the Plaintiffs' various claims for specified amounts of unliquidated damages violate Local Rule 8.1 which provides, in part, that:

The demand for judgment required in any pleading in any civil action pursuant to Fed.R.Civ.P.8(a)(3) may set forth generally that the party

claiming damages is entitled to monetary relief *but shall not claim any specific sum where unliquidated damages are involved*. The short plain statement of jurisdiction, required by Fed.R.Civ.P.8(a)(1), shall set forth any amounts needed to invoke the jurisdiction of the court but no other.

Local Rule 8.1 (emphasis added).

Since this prayer for relief violates Local Rule 8.1 by specifying particular amounts of unliquidated damages, these specific dollar claims should be stricken from the complaint without prejudice to the Plaintiff arguing in any subsequent trial or hearing on the merits for any appropriate amount of damages supported by the evidence.

We recognize that *pro se* plaintiffs should be afforded an opportunity to amend a complaint before the complaint is dismissed with prejudice, see Fletcher-Hardee Corp. v. Pote Concrete Contractors, 482 F.3d 247, 253 (3d Cir. 2007), unless it is clear that granting further leave to amend would be futile, or result in undue delay. Alston v. Parker, 363 F.3d 229, 235 (3d Cir. 2004). In this case, Gibbs has not alleged facts with respect to the supervisory Defendants named in his complaint that would state a claim upon which relief may be granted, and it appears that he may be unable to do so. Nonetheless, out of an abundance of caution, and in order to preserve the Plaintiff's rights, it is recommended that this matter be dismissed without prejudice to Gibbs attempting to amend this federal complaint to state a claim upon

which relief may be granted in federal court, by including proper allegations that meet the requirements of federal law.

III. Recommendation

Accordingly, for the foregoing reasons, IT IS RECOMMENDED that the Plaintiff's complaint should be dismissed as to Defendants Wetzel and Lamas, but that the dismissal of this action be without prejudice to any final effort by Gibbs to timely allege facts in an amended complaint which might state a claim upon which relief may be granted, provided Gibbs acts within 20 days of any dismissal order.

The parties are further placed on notice that pursuant to Local Rule 72.3:

Any party may object to a magistrate judge's proposed findings, recommendations or report addressing a motion or matter described in 28 U.S.C. § 636 (b)(1)(B) or making a recommendation for the disposition of a prisoner case or a habeas corpus petition within fourteen (14) days after being served with a copy thereof. Such party shall file with the clerk of court, and serve on the magistrate judge and all parties, written objections which shall specifically identify the portions of the proposed findings, recommendations or report to which objection is made and the basis for such objections. The briefing requirements set forth in Local Rule 72.2 shall apply. A judge shall make a de novo determination of those portions of the report or specified proposed findings or recommendations to which objection is made and may accept, reject, or modify, in whole or in part, the findings or recommendations made by the magistrate judge. The judge, however, need conduct a new hearing only in his or her discretion or where required by law, and may consider the record developed before the magistrate judge, making his or her own determination on the basis of that record. The judge may also receive further evidence, recall

witnesses or recommit the matter to the magistrate judge with instructions.

Submitted this 6th day of September 2012.

S/Martin C. Carlson

Martin C. Carlson
United States Magistrate Judge